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AUTHOR Herb, Rhonda
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ABSTRACT

Oprah Winfrey is one of the wealthiest and most powerful entertainers operating in the media today. More than mere celebrity, however, she represents the notion of the heroic for her fans. In a sense, she operates as a television evangelist offering advice on secular issues of the day. This paper explores Oprah's role in influencing audiences to read books, documenting the ways in which she draws attention to certain types of books and transfers her own public image to the content of those books. Through the agenda-setting model, we can better understand how a celebrity proponent like Oprah Winfrey is able to transmit her preferred issues to her audiences' agenda, making these issues salient for millions of fans. This study reviews agenda setting theory, considers the power of celebrity influence, and then uses this information to examine Oprah's Book Club. Through her power as a film and television performer, Oprah associates herself with certain books, their characters and authors, thus providing her audience with a framework for the reading experience. A review of featured book club selections is provided by theme, characteristics of authors, storylines of a representative sampling of titles, and observations of both critics and fans. The conclusion drawn is that Oprah's book selections consistently offer readers a way back from pain. Oprah herself lends psychic support to her followers, and this culture of healing is extended to her book club selection. Oprah's Book Club is one more opportunity for this star, through the power and influence of her person, to focus her audiences' attention on her perception of the salient issues of the day. Contains 39 references. An appendix lists the books selected for Oprah's Book Club. (Author/RS)

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Setting the Agenda for Reading: Oprah Winfrey's Book Club

by Rhonda Herb

Doctoral student

School of Communication and the Arts

Regent University

Virginia Beach, Virginia

R. Herb

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Abstract

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Oprah Winfrey is one of the wealthiest and most powerful entertainers operating in the media today. More than mere celebrity, however, she represents the notion of the heroic for her fans. In a sense, she operates as a television evangelist offering advice on secular issues of the day. This paper explores Oprah's role in influencing audiences to read books, documenting the ways in which she draws attention to certain types of books and transfers her own public image to the content of those books. Through the agenda-setting model, we can better understand how a celebrity proponent like Oprah Winfrey is able to transmit her preferred issues to her audiences' agenda, making these issues salient for millions of fans.

This study reviews agenda setting theory, considers the power of celebrity influence, and then uses this information to examine Oprah's Book Club. Through her power as a film and television performer, Oprah associates herself with certain books, their characters and authors, thus providing her audience with a framework for the reading experience. A review of featured book club selections is provided by theme, characteristics of authors, storylines of a representative sampling of titles, and observations of both critics and fans. The conclusion drawn is that Oprah's book selections consistently offer readers a way back from pain. Oprah herself lends psychic support to her followers, and this culture of healing is extended to her book club selections. Oprah's Book Club is one more opportunity for this star, through the power and influence of her persona, to focus her audiences' attention on her perception of the salient issues of the day.

Setting the Agenda for Reading: Oprah Winfrey's Book Club

> "I can't imagine the last time any major celebrity has used their status for such a worthy cause. If Oprah likes to read, then maybe, it is okay for the rest of the nation. . . ."
>
> "What blows my mind about this is the fact that there are probably millions of people SHARING a piece of literature at the same time. Can you see how powerful this is? We've done it with local reading groups and even some of us here on ncte-talk, but WOW—millions!" ("NCTE-Talk")

A remarkable phenomenon has been taking place on television screens across the country over the past five years. Approximately once a month a woman appears on a talk show to tell 13 million viewers (Max n.p.) not what to watch, what to buy, or what to wear, but rather, what to read. Her reading list encompasses books by Nobel Laureate-winning authors, as well as unknown and previously unpublished authors. Her studio audience consists of women eager to offer their views on these books, their characters and issues, and the impact on their own lives. This individual does not profit financially from these endorsements; rather, she seems to transcend herself from salesperson to spiritual advisor through the types of books she recommends.

Celebrities have power in our society. Frequently, they influence our consumption of products, our attitudes and values, even what we aspire to be (Brown and Fraser 5). The present study reviews agenda setting theory, considers the power of celebrity influence, and then places this information squarely in the middle of a modern-day miracle: one influential woman's attempt to increase the quantity and quality of books read by television audiences.

Oprah Winfrey, self-made woman of humble origins, popular talk show host for nearly twenty years, may not be the most obvious choice to influence America's reading habits. But the remarkable truth is that Oprah Winfrey, while not an author herself, conveys the attributes of

credibility, likeability, and power, which influence audiences' opinions of products and services (Kelman 65). Through her ability to convey warmth and familiarity with her television audiences, she increases the persuasiveness of her endorsement. Aaker documented the ability of a communicator to achieve liking and identification with her audience through the sharing of similar attitudes, opinions, activities, background, social status, or lifestyle. Other research studies, including those of Woodside and Davenport, and Busch and Willson, have shown that customers who perceive an endorser to be similar to themselves are more likely to be influenced by her message.

What follows is an exploration of Oprah's role in influencing audiences to read books, documenting the ways in which she draws attention to certain types of books and transfers her own public image to the content of those books.

Setting an Agenda for Reading

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw provided the seminal work in agenda-setting theory. McCombs and Shaw questioned why certain news stories received media coverage and others did not, and what effect this coverage had on public attitude. The researchers posited that by selecting and emphasizing particular news stories, news editors and journalists were focusing attention on and influencing the public's perception of the most important issues of the day (McCombs and Bell 93). Their hypothesis was rooted in the earlier, landmark work of Walter Lippmann, who theorized that the news media are the main links between an event in the real world and the images in our minds of these events (29).

McCombs and Shaw used the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to test their hypothesis that the news media influence the public's perception of pertinent issues by their selection and display of news stories (McCombs and Bell 94). The dependent variable

in their study was salience, a term used to describe those issues voters felt to be the most important in the election. The independent variable in the Chapel Hill study was news media content or the media's agenda. The researchers tested their hypothesis by comparing an open-ended survey with a content analysis of nine media sources. Because there was a strong relationship between the public's and the media's agendas, McCombs and Shaw named this transference of salience the agenda-setting influence of mass communication (96).

McCombs and Shaw's theory has two dimensions. The first dimension pertains to the transmission of an issue and its salience from the news media to the public's agenda. The second dimension describes the media's role in shaping and framing those issues in the public mind (McCombs and Bell 94). This paper will concern itself with both dimensions, attempting to explain the role of a celebrity proponent in transmitting and framing an array of issues from her personal agenda to her fans' schedule of interests.

Pulitzer Prize-winning Walter Lippman's earlier work on media effects dates back to the 1920s. In Public Opinion, Lippman suggested that the free press exacerbated the propagandizing tendencies of society by acting "like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness and into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions" (229). The problem of the mass electorate, Lippmanm believed, could be circumvented by a group of experts who stood apart from the government and the masses and provided wisdom and advice. This concept is similar to Plato's notion of the philosopher-king, with one exception: Lippmann recommended the Good and the Wise provide advice only, and not do the governing themselves (258-9).

Thus, through the agenda-setting model, we can better understand how celebrity proponents such as Oprah Winfrey are able to transmit their issues to their audiences, make those issues salient, and even fulfill the role of the Good and the Wise in providing advice to society.

Subsequent studies, such as Funkhouser's analysis of public opinion in the 1960s, have replicated the original agenda-setting concept and even expanded the evidence to suggest there is little correlation between statistical indicators of reality and public opinion of media coverage. Shaw and McCombs replicated their basic hypothesis again in 1977, determining this time that "the influence of agenda setting on different categories of voters is a product of exposure, type of medium, political interest, need for orientation, and interpersonal communication" (McCombs and Bell 97). Zhu examined detailed analyses of public opinion on three major issues of the day and determined that news coverage of each of the three issues influenced their salience among the public. The salience of each issue was also influenced by the salience of the competing issues, as well as the salience of the news coverage. He concluded that agenda setting is a zero-sum game, due to the limiting carrying capacity of the public agenda (834).

Agenda-setting research has evolved over the past 30 years to examine additional aspects of the media, the public or target audience, and the issues and their longevity. Subsequent phases of research have explored the psychological angle of agenda setting, suggesting that certain people have the need to be oriented by their environment and seek out media outlets for the information they require (McCombs and Bell 102). Candidate image and voter interest in political campaigns have also been examined, concluding that the media seem particularly effective in creating public interest in political candidates and campaign strategies (103). Additional research studies have explored the role of the journalist as gatekeeper to determine

who controls the flow of news (104). Each of these studies has built on previous research to help determine how news is filtered through media outlets.

The second dimension of agenda-setting attempts to explain the ways in which the news media frames the issues and primes audiences to receive those issues. Entman suggested that "journalists may follow the rules for 'objective reporting' and yet convey a dominant framing of the news text that prevents audiences from making a balanced assessment of the situation" (56). Iyengar and Kinder offered priming as a psychological process in which the media's "emphasis on particular issues not only increases the salience of those issues, but it also activates in people's memories previously acquired information about those issues" (98).

The bulk of agenda-setting research has dealt with the role of the media in disseminating information to the public. More recently, studies have attempted to explore the role of others in this process, including issue proponents and celebrities. Researchers Brown, Fraser and Bocarnea explored the agenda-setting consequences of audience response in the O.J. Simpson trial. This study will probe the role of a celebrity, Oprah Winfrey, in influencing awareness of societal issues by her endorsement of particular books. Particularly, what is the "Oprah genre," as a literature professor at the University of Wisconsin has dubbed her typical selections, and how does Oprah use her endorsements to set an agenda for the types of issues her audiences read and think about?

Celebrity Influence

Throughout history key individuals have served as heroic figures to be admired and emulated, but only in the twentieth century have celebrities, assisted by the process of mediation, begun to permeate all aspects of culture and society. Through the transmittal of public images, sports figures, musicians, television personalities and film stars perform roles and offer meaning

to their fans. Marketers have utilized these celebrity images to draw attention to their products and, through a rub-off effect, transfer image values to their products (O'Mahony and Meenaghan 16).

Both social psychology and identification theory offer models for understanding how influence is transmitted from celebrities to products. McCracken defines a celebrity endorser as "Any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (310). Evidence emerging from these combined fields provides a framework for theorizing about the power of celebrity endorsement on audiences. Source effect is based on the belief that characteristics of the message source have a beneficial effect on message receptivity (Meenaghan 330). The source effect phenomenon suggests that various characteristics of the source, as perceived by the receiver, will influence the persuasiveness of the source's message. The two basic models are Hovland and Weiss's credibility model and McGuire's source attractiveness model. Source credibility is the extent to which the recipient perceives the source as having relevant knowledge and/or experience and trusts the source to give unbiased information. The source attractiveness model suggests that attractiveness affects the receptivity of messages (264). Research studies offer contrary evidence on the power of physical attractiveness, but strongly suggest the importance of the elements of likeability and similarity as persuasive characteristics in influencing purchase intentions (O'Mahony and Meenaghan 18). The source models have been validated by a number of studies, and suggest that celebrities owe something of their effectiveness to their credibility and likeability.

Not only are celebrities useful in promoting the sale of products, their names and images are also used to influence social beliefs and behaviors. Fraser and Brown studied the influence

celebrities such as Elvis Presley have on their fans, including the ability to model values and behavior (2). A study by Medical College of Wisconsin Cancer Center researchers indicated that celebrities can influence decisions about health care, as evidenced by Nancy Reagan's decision to have a mastectomy (Nattinger et al. 762).

Herbert Kelman, in his landmark 1961 study, attempted to develop a model of public opinion formation utilizing three attitude change processes: internalization, identification, and compliance (63). Kelman proposed that information from a credible source influences beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and/or behavior through the process of internalization, which occurs when the receiver adopts the opinion of the credible communicator since he or she believes information from this source to be correct. Persuasion occurs through a process of identification, in which the receiver emulates the attitudes or behavior of the source because she aspires to be like that person. Compliance suggests that individuals model particular ideas or behaviors in order to obtain a favorable response from another person (65).

Emerging research on the process of social influence points to the multi-faceted nature of celebrity endorsement. Celebrities are multidimensional by their very nature and seem to possess distinct characteristics in the eyes of different audience members, which in turn affects the persuasiveness of the messages they deliver. Limited research has been conducted on the processes by which mass audiences obtain meaning and identification with mediated celebrities.

Celebrity functions to "celebrate the potential of the individual and the mass's support of the individual in mass society," states P. David Marshall (43). Oprah Winfrey seems to represent potential for her audience. Coming from humble beginnings, she has evolved to become one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in America. O'Mahony and Meenaghan's study suggests that the source characteristics with the greatest impact on audiences are those of

credibility and expertise, and that consumers expect congruity between the celebrity endorser's perceived image and the types of products they endorse (24). Oprah Winfrey has aligned herself with the world of ideas and self-improvement, and more recently, with a particular type of book which offers recurrent messages to female audiences.

Oprah Winfrey is not a typical celebrity. She does not conform to Hollywood's prototype of the ideal feminine shape and standard of beauty; rather, her rounded form may assure her fans that even women who are not physically perfect can be successful. While she performed in a number of successful movies, she is not highly remembered for her film roles. Instead, she articulates her power by focusing on issues, personal improvement, and women's advocacy through the media of television, book endorsements, and her own "O" magazine. She is rich and powerful, she says, in spite of the fact that she is black, female, and overweight, suggesting that race, gender, and beauty are not consequential to being successful in America.

Unlike many celebrities whose duration of fame is short, Oprah's enduring personality suggests the importance of hard work rather than mere good fortune and circumstance as a route to success. She reflects the ideals of contemporary society—self-made woman, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. Wyllie says we equate success with money (4), and Oprah is one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in media today. As producer and host of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, she entertains millions of television viewers around the world. She is the first woman to top the Forbes list of America's highest-paid entertainers, and she is on her way to becoming the first black billionaire (Skinner n.p.). Her more recent activities include ventures into publishing, music, film, philanthropy, education, health and fitness, and social advocacy ("Oprah.com"). In front of the camera, she has an amazing gift to communicate genuineness and sincerity. As David Skinner notes, "With the physique of a homebody and the informality of a

warm and gossipy next-door neighbor, this woman might have just come from the kitchen with barely time to get dressed" (n. p.).

In Celebrity and Power, David Marshall states that "Celebrity status also confers on the person a certain discursive power; within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into the media system as being legitimately significant"(x). Oprah Winfrey receives 25,000 letters each week from her fans, and the A & E television show *Biography* received its highest ratings ever when it aired her life story (Skinner n.p.) In January 2001, Newsweek honored Oprah Winfrey as the "Woman of the Century." In 1999, she was honored with the National Book Foundation's 50th Anniversary Gold Medal for her contribution to books and reading ("Oprah.com").

I would like to pursue this notion of Oprah as a "voice above others." She has established herself in the celebrity firmament as a mentor, a guide, even a spiritual advisor, to millions of fans. As Daniel Boorstin has stated, a celebrity is someone who is known for being known, rather than for serving others (57). Celebrities are passive; they have one function: "to be." Joseph Campbell, on the other hand, suggests that heroes are individuals who return from a journey to help improve society (30). Oprah is not content with being. Having returned from her own transformational journey, she seems intent on using her influence to "bestow boons" of advice and encouragement upon her fans. Far from passive, she is actively engaged in her interests and those issues she favors. The media have made her a celebrity, yet she has transformed herself into something more by her deeds, her duration, and her embodiment of the mainstream cultural values of our time. Thus, more than mere celebrity, Oprah Winfrey represents the notion of the heroic for her fans. In a sense, she operates as a television evangelist for secular issues of the day.

Joseph Campbell, best known for his work on the hero in society, compiled considerable work on the role of the female spiritual archetype in ancient times. In The Masks of God, Campbell contends that the "goddess mother" figured prominently in the earliest high civilizations, around 7500 to 3500 B. C. The "bountiful goddess Earth," as he describes her, represented fertility and motherhood, nourishment and life, death and rebirth for early peoples. This female archetype was eventually replaced by the patriarchal tribesmen who gave rise to the classical myths of ancient Greece and the narratives of the Old Testament (7). Campbell emphasizes the importance of the role of the goddess and earth mother in early civilizations, pointing out " [. . .] the image of the mother and the female affects the psyche differently from that of the father and the male. Sentiments of identity are associated most immediately with the mother [. . .]." (70).

More than celebrity, Oprah seems to fulfill the role of the earth mother, the philosopher-king, even the spiritual counselor, for contemporary audiences. Mary Elizabeth Williams, writing for the online magazine Salon, says "Oprah may not be the supreme being, but she's running very close [. . .]. If she's not God, her success story is at least undeniably miraculous" (n.p.). In fact, Oprah's very construction appears to seek energy from spiritual and celestial metaphors. In attempting to communicate her personal journey, Oprah uses metaphors of spirituality, growth, and transcendence. Her Angel Network encourages volunteerism and philanthropy, because "you get from the world what you give to the world." Viewers and readers are encouraged to Nominate-an-Angel who has made a difference in her community "through the courage to give." Angel winners are recognized each week on Oprah's television show and granted up to $100,000 to continue their charitable work. Even Oprah's version of the ubiquitous female makeover emphasizes the spiritual over the physical, by encouraging women

to "Turn your life into a work of art and let your soul show you where you need to go" ("Oprah.com").

A broadcaster since the age of 19 (Williams n.p.), language is Oprah's tool, and she wields it skillfully. However, Oprah talks not just about her own struggles and achievements, but also about helping others achieve their potential. When subject experts appear on her show, she serves as an intermediary to reword their language and ideas into her viewers' simpler prose. She also serves as the resolver of problems, setting herself apart from the experts and increasing her familiarity with her audiences. Advisor and counselor, she serves more closely the role of one of Plato's the Wise and the Good rather than the typical celebrity intent on 15 minutes of Warhol fame.

She also serves as the archetypal storyteller by encouraging her fans to read and suggesting what they read. We receive insight into the important role books played in her formative years when Oprah states, "It was only through books that I could see there was another way of being in the world and I was, like: 'I want whatever that is'" (qtd. in Sullivan). She introduces her monthly book club selection by telling her audience that reading was the outlet that convinced her life existed beyond Mississippi when she was still a child. The extratextual details of her life, communicated by her talk show, her magazine, and her web site, suggest a woman who has devoted herself to identity and improvement. Story topics frequently teach viewers and readers how to "celebrate joy," "step out of the box," "reinvent yourself," "change the way you think," "live in the moment," and "live your best life."

Her recently launched "O" magazine suggests by its very title the elements of wonder, surprise, and openness that she espouses to her audience. Even her "O to Go" electronic greeting cards, available on her web site, communicate these favored topics: the joy of reading, letting go,

enjoying life, taking risks, reinventing oneself, trusting others. Selected quotes are taken from authors as diverse as Tennessee Williams, Bertolt Brecht, Katherine Mansfield, Harold Bloom, Thomas Jefferson, and Joseph Campbell. Rather than being invented by her audience or the media, Oprah seems intent on constructing her own image as seer and benefactor.

She receives no reimbursement or compensation for her endorsements. While publishers are happy to take advantage of her seal of endorsement on their book jackets, they are also required to donate 10,000 copies of each selection to school and public libraries ("New Oprah Book Club Selection"). Thus, viewers are not required to buy a product to engage in her reading adventure, and the club serves as a vehicle for Oprah to influence reading habits and promote the work of authors she favors. Reading enthusiasts can view authors and other viewers discussing the books on Oprah's television talk show, or they can go online to chat with authors, read tips on writing, and engage in book club message boards and discussions.

"The Oprah Winfrey Show," which debuted on television in the mid-1980s, originally seemed constructed as an outlet for Oprah's own anger. Programs in the first six years dealt with such topics as priestly sin, autoerotic asphyxia, drunken drivers, date rape, and Satanists. The more mature Oprah, however, seems to have progressed from placing blame—usually on men—to encouraging women to affect their own rescue. Her show topics and messages have mellowed: Follow your dreams, eat sensibly, relax with yoga. From a strident advocate of women's rights, she has evolved into a secular evangelist promoting her evolving values. In this role, she serves as a sounding board for the reaffirmation of society's changing values. After winning 32 Emmy awards, she announced in 1998 that she and her talk show would no longer compete for the award. She is, she claims, merely doing "God's work" (qtd. in Skinner n.p.).

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the issues and themes being transmitted and framed from Oprah's personal agenda to her audience. Given the powerful effect celebrities have on our values, attitudes and behavior (Brown and Fraser 16), what are the messages Oprah is communicating through her book club selections? Through her power as a film and television performer, Oprah associates herself with certain books, their characters and authors, thus providing her audience with a framework for the reading experience. On what social agenda is she focusing our attention?

To answer these questions, I will provide a review of featured book club selections by theme, characteristics of authors, storylines of a representative sampling of titles, and observations of both critics and fans. I will conclude with my observations and attempt to determine commonalities for the types of issues Oprah is promoting to her millions of fans.

Findings

In 1996, Oprah Winfrey began *Oprah's Book Club*, an on-air reading club designed to encourage literacy. Every one of the books selected for this book club has become a national bestseller (Max n.p.). Oprah recommends books to her television viewers approximately once a month, and offers discussion questions, facts about the books, message boards, and online chats with authors and other readers at her web site, Oprah.com. Oprah encourages her viewers to read each new selection and to write to the show with their thoughts and insights. Four viewers are selected to have dinner with Oprah and the author, and later to appear on her show to discuss the works and their impact on their lives.

To borrow a phrase from David Marshall, Oprah seems to be offering her services as a "cultural interpreter" (124) for her audience's reading tastes. Oprah's own status is transferred to the collections of literary works she endorses, even while the content of these books reinforces

her image in a feedback loop. Her web site lists her top three favorite books: John Steinback's The Grapes of Wrath, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird. Oprah says she has been drawn to books since the age of three, and she claims that books helped her survive a difficult childhood. Her early years read like a book plot: Her parents never married, her mother collected welfare, she suffered from sexual abuse and ran away from home, became pregnant, lost the baby. In fact, her life story parallels the narrative of Wally Lamb's She's Come Undone, the most popular of all her book selections. In this tale, a smart, strong woman with weight problems overcomes sexual abuse to realize her full potential. "The reason I love books," Oprah claims, "is because they teach us something about ourselves" (qtd. in Max n.p.).

From September 1996 to June 2001, Oprah's Book Club has featured 43 books written by 36 different authors (see Appendix A). Only seven of the 36 authors are men; only six of the tales focus on male protagonists. Pulitzer and Nobel award-winner Toni Morrison has appeared on the list three times. Literary giants Maya Angelou, the famed black poet and novelist, and Isabel Allende, the acclaimed South American author, have also appeared, but many of the authors, such as Edwidge Danticat and Tawni O'Dell, were previously unknown or unpublished.

For a story to touch us, its characters, plots, and settings must be familiar in some sense to our own. What seems to motivate and please readers is the ability to identify with a book's protagonist. D. T. Max says that "Winfrey's choices tend to draw their themes from real life, but their locales and lifestyles come from our fantasies" (n.p.). Frequent themes in the books endorsed by Oprah are family traumas and a character's struggle to overcome tragic odds and circumstances. The books, rather like Oprah's television talk shows, seem therapeutic in nature. The trials of abused women and children, couples in codependent relationships, dysfunctional

families, and racist communities, are frequent plots. McCracken posited a cultural transfer model which suggests a celebrity's effectiveness as an endorser is related to the cultural meanings associated with that individual (310). The healing spirit is identified with Oprah through her own life and textual discourse, and Oprah transfers that meaning from the books she endorses to the readers who enjoy them. Thus, through identification with Oprah, readers view themselves in an author's narrative, and through a spiritual or psychological connection they transcend the details of their lives to connect in a therapeutic sense with the characters they read about.

Social issues abound in these books—domestic and economic challenges in Jane Hamilton's The Story of Ruth, moral and political dilemmas in Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible. Obesity, sexual and child abuse, alcohol and drug addiction also figure prominently. Anna Quindlen's Black and Blue features a heroine caught in spousal abuse, as does Hamilton's The Story of Ruth. Wally Lamb's She's Come Undone portrays the rape of a 13-year old. In Billie Letts' Where the Heart Is, the heroine witnesses her boyfriend sodomizing her son. These fictive accounts are compelling, emotional narratives that rely upon men's violence against women to propel their storylines. David Skinner laments, "What a pity that the influential Oprah's Book Club is enamored almost exclusively of a literary world where the women are innocent, the men are brutal, and if you watch the river long enough, the body of your husband will float by" (n.p.)

Yet these stories also rely heavily upon the heroine's ability to overcome odds and embark on a personal journey of recovery. Allende's Daughter of Fortune is a lush epic about a young protagonist who adventures to 1850s California to liberate herself and gain a new, unconventional life. Elizabeth Berg's Open House offers a light-hearted approach to one

woman's inner turmoil when her husband deserts her. Maeve Binchy's Tara Road juxtaposes two protagonists, one Irish, one American, who learn to rebuild their lives through a circle of female friends following the trauma of death and divorce. Edwidge Danticat's heroine must learn to understand and accept the ancient traditions of Haitian women before living a full and complete life in the prosaic Breath, Eyes, Memory. Stories of this type seem to serve as spiritual recovery steps for their readers. Just as Oprah embodies empowerment, many of her book club selections teach readers how to "let go," "forgive," "accept," and "rise above" unfortunate circumstances. Online discussion questions for Malika Oufkir's Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail encourage readers to probe the relationship between the protagonist and her family members, focusing on the methods they use to encourage and support one another through their trials. When Oprah holds on-air discussions about such books, she asks her audience to recount how the stories are relevant to their own lives. Rather than attempt literary criticism, the discussions tend to remain focused on her and her viewers' responses to the stories and characters.

In the great debate over the range of Oprah's book selections, critics grouse that "she turns her viewers into sheep, imposing the tastes of an overpaid TV star on helpless consumers" (Williams n.p.). Gavin McNett says the books are chosen to "play on base sentiment, to reaffirm popular wisdom, to tell readers what they expect to hear and to help them learn what they already know" (n.p.) Yet even the harshest critics acknowledge the impact of millions of women, many of them non-readers, rushing out to buy Oprah's pick of the month. Oprah seems to have made reading less intimidating for people not comfortable with the world of books and ideas. One online reader shares:

> ". . . Song of Solomon taught me something about myself and the day of the club with Tony (sic) Morrison at Oprah's home was a truly profound experience for me. When I first began to read I was having great difficulty and I could not understand what was bothering me so much. It finally dawned on me that the difficulty had to do with 'seeing' the characters. What I realized was that in my too white world, I just did not have a store of people and faces and encounters to really imagine or 'see' Ms. Morrison's wonderful characters." ("Letters to Oprah's Book Club" n.p.)

Oprah's influence over her audience extends beyond the books she recommends. In 1996, when Oprah announced on her television show that concern over mad cow disease had convinced her to stop eating beef, the Texas beef industry sued her, holding her accountable for plummeting beef prices. In response, she moved the filming of her talk show to Amarillo for the five-week trial, won the lawsuit, and emerged from the debacle victorious (Ryan n.p.). While many question her literary taste, her impact on her fans' reading habits seems unquestionable. Mary Elizabeth Williams writes, "I may not get my reading list from [Oprah's Book Club], but I've nevertheless learned something from its success—what an astonishing difference one person can make, and what elitist twits people who pride themselves on their erudition can be" (n.p.).

A few books stand out for their exception to the theme of troubled women on an odyssey to find happy endings. Bernard Schlink's The Reader is an unusual, complex coming-of-age story about an older woman and an adolescent boy in postwar Germany. The book was recognized as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year and a Los Angeles Times Book of the Year, and seems unlikely to have found wide readership without Oprah Winfrey's endorsement. Ernest Gaine's A Lesson Before Dying concerns a young black man on death row for a crime he didn't commit. Bill Cosby's trilogy of children's books encourages youngsters to

spend more time playing imaginatively and less time watching television. While Oprah's staff help her review all the books which are forwarded by anxious publishers, Winfrey makes every final selection.

Jacquelyn Mitchard was a widow with four children when her novel The Deep End of the Ocean was selected as the title to launch Oprah's new club in 1996. After Mitchard's guest appearance on Oprah's talk show, the New York public library alone received requests for 4000 holds for the book. The book eventually had four million copies in print (Max n.p.). A. Manette Ansay's Vinegar Hill jumped from 18,000 copies in print to 875,000 after Oprah's endorsement. In total, all the selections have earned publishers an estimated $175 million (Max n.p.). The English Department at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, offers a literature course in "Reading Oprah's Book Club" that encourages critical discussion of the books Oprah advocates ("Oprah Syllabus").

If there is a single commonality, it is that these stories tell the way back from pain. In Oprah herself, we sense a quest to heal some inner pain, and it takes the form of lending psychic support to her followers. She surrounds herself with metaphors of the spirit: her Angel Network, her Nominate-An-Angel program, her Remember Your Spirit chat room, her online Spirit Journal. This culture of healing is extended to Oprah's book club. One questions if reading Oprah's favored selections will make anyone a better, wiser person, but no one doubts that this famous reader has encouraged a national literacy phenomenon. Oprah has said that her ideal weekend is spent reading three books back to back (Max n.p.), and thousands of fans have gone online to express how these books have touched their hearts ("Oprah's Message Boards").

Summary and Conclusions

In this study I have attempted to determine the role Oprah Winfrey plays in influencing the types of books her audiences read. She may not be forming audiences' opinions on these subjects, but she is certainly achieving success in encouraging millions of women to ponder the complex social issues of race, class, and gender that dominate these novels. One television audience member shared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that Janet Fitch's White Oleander, about troubled children in a negligent foster care system, was the first book she had read since high school (Max n.p.).

Entman says the concept of framing can help us to understand the dominant meanings that audiences obtain from communication texts—whether they are speeches, news reports, or even novels (51-2). To illustrate how Oprah manages to frame complex social issues for her audience, Gavin McNett argues that most of her book endorsements:

> [. . .] come with an easy issue and a correct opinion already attached, such as the domestic violence of Quindlen's Black and Blue (you're against it), the womanliness of Chris Bojhalian's Midwives (you're for it) and the blunt racio-sexual politics of Maya Angelou, Edwidge Danticat, Breena Clarke and others (you identify with brave Little Topsy in a world of Simon Legrees). (n.p.).

Yet it is hard not to applaud a celebrity endorsement that encourages viewers to turn off the television, read a book, and share their reflections in a private journal or with a friend. It is true, as writer Jane Sullivan suggests, that "Oprah privileges one kind of book at the expense of others, and this kind of book is not necessarily the best around [. . .]. Yet without Oprah, where would mass reading be? Probably still back with Danielle Steele and her ilk" (n.p.).

Having returned from the place where "waist" matters not, Oprah Winfrey seems inclined to help her fellow woman achieve similar satisfaction in life. Oprah's Book Club is one more

opportunity for this star, through the power and influence of her persona, to focus her audiences' attention on her perception of the salient issues of the day. To millions of fans, Oprah Winfrey serves as a heroic prototype of the humble, hardworking woman who has turned challenges into profitability, and now, in the role of secular evangelist, offers these fans a path to success if they read, reflect, imagine, and dream as she does.

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Appendix A

List of Books Selected for Oprah's Book Club

June 2001:
Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail by Malika Oufkir

March 2001:
Icy Sparks by Gwyn Hyman Rubio

2001:
We Were the Mulvaneys by Joyce Carol Oats

2000:
The House of Sand and Fog by Andrew Dubus III

September 2000:
Drowning Ruth by Christina Schwarz

August 2000:
Open House by Elizabeth Berg

June 2000:
The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

May 2000:
While I was Gone by Sue Miller

April 2000:
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

March 2000:
Back Roads by Tawni O'Dell

February 2000:
Daughter of Fortune by Isabel Allende

January 2000:
Gap Creek by Robert Morgan

December 1999:
A Map of the World by Jane Hamilton

November 1999:
Vinegar Hill by A. Manette Ansay

October 1999:
River, Cross My Heart by Breena Clarke

September 1999:
Tara Road by Maeve Binchy

June 1999:
Mother of Pearl by Melinda Haynes

May 1999:
White Oleander by Janet Fitch

March 1999:
The Pilot's Wife by Anita Shreve

February 1999:
The Reader by Bernhard Schlink

January 1999:
Jewel by Bret Lott

December 1998:
Where the Heart Is by Billie Letts

October 1998:
Midwives by Chris Bohjalian

September 1998:
What Looks Like Crazy on an O by Pearl Cleage

June 1998:
I Know This Much is True by Wally Lamb

May 1998:
Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat

April 1998:
Black and Blue by Anna Quindlen

March 1998:
Here on Earth by Alice Hoffman

January 1998:
Paradise by Toni Morrison

December 1997:

The Best Way to Play, The Meanest Thing to Say, and The Treasure Hunt by Bill Cosby

October 1997:
Ellen Foster and A Virtuous Woman by Kaye Gibbons

September 1997:
A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J Gaines

June 1997:
Songs in Ordinary Time by Mary McGarry Morris

May 1997:
The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou

April 1997:
The Rapture of Canaan by Sheri Reynolds

February 1997:
Stones from the River by Ursula Hegi

January 1997:
She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb

November 1996:
The Book of Ruth by Jane Hamilton

October 1996:
Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison

September 1996:
The Deep End of the Ocean by Jacquelyn Mitchard